

Acknowledgments

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Annotation: New Rules for Authorship in the Journal: Your Contributions Are Recognized—and Published!

We thank the readers and editors who responded to our request in the editorial *Authors and Authorship—Reform or Abolition?*¹ last July to share their views with us on authorship. Formal replies appear in this issue.²⁻¹² The editorial also generated many candid rejoinders and lively conversations. The comments²⁻³ and letters to the editor⁴⁻¹² make clear that no one is content with the current practice, but that opinions vary widely as to how best to improve the situation. There is no shortage of sound suggestions and deeply held convictions on the issue of authorship of scientific papers. Our task has been to sift through these responses as well as the literature and existing practices to arrive at what seems the best course for this particular journal at this particular time.

In that light, a change from current Journal practice is essential. To maintain the current system would be to ignore the collective opinion of our most important constituency and the one we especially sought advice from, namely, our readers. A problem worthy of attention in a public health journal has been identified, pilot studies have been conducted at other journals, and it is time to conduct our own intervention.

Contributions Are Solicited

Rennie and Yank² have given much useful thought to the benefits of listing contributors to scientific papers according to their contributions. We agree that everyone

gains, especially the reader. Last year, we changed the page, appearing in every Journal issue, titled *What AJPH Authors Should Know*. The standard requirement that authors state in the cover letter¹¹ "All authors have contributed to each of three activities (1. conception/design and/or analysis/interpretation; 2. writing; 3. approval of final version) and will take public responsibility for the content of the paper" was expanded to include "Under items 1 and 2, the exact contributions of each author must be specified." Many, if not all, authors have readily complied. Now we move forward and adopt our earlier inclination to publish these exact contributions in a footnote.¹ This practice follows those now in place at *The Lancet* and the *British Medical Journal*,² as Smith⁸ invites us to do. Only time and experience will determine whether the new requirements we establish here are more or less successful than the ones we formerly instituted.

Authorship Is Retained

We believe that authorship in the traditional sense remains a necessary, important, and creative function in science. To abolish authorship altogether is likely to do more harm than good. As previously noted, science still largely resides in the academic world and, in all major universities, promotions in large part hinge on authorship.¹ We agree with Hemenway⁴ that the solution is to change incentives. While the movement is

gaining momentum, we have not yet arrived. We do, in fact, limit the number of authors to six. Although Comstock¹¹ (formerly editor-in-chief of the *American Journal of Epidemiology*) advocates fewer, we have not always been able to hold the line at 6. Admittedly, we have had to exceed the limit only occasionally, and devices such as specifying Writing Committees have helped. Yankauer¹² (long the editor of this journal) wonders how Journal editors determine the justification for more than 6 authors. In practice, editors have accepted reasonable explanations for the legitimacy of the claim. In now requiring the exact contributions of each author to be listed and published, however, the assessment should be somewhat easier to judge for readers and editors alike.

Contributions Worthy of Authorship

Winkelstein⁹ (formerly the assistant managing editor of the *American Journal of Epidemiology*) observes that the attribution of authors' roles in a publication has a historical precedent in a now-famous paper published over 90 years ago,¹³ and thus seems eminently feasible. Feinleib,¹⁰ our editorial colleague who was candid in his initial, uncensored reactions to the editorial on authorship, clearly

Editor's Note. See related comments and letters to the editor in the section, "Authorship: Readers and Editors Respond" (p 824) in this issue.

explains the difficulty of deciding on the range of activities and contributions an individual must make to a research project to deserve recognition as an author. Given the broad areas covered in public health, it is never an easy task to come up with one set of guidelines that applies in every field. Baranowski et al.⁷ suggest, "Perhaps different rules need to be formulated to recognize the authorship needs in different areas of research?"

We leave it for authors to negotiate among themselves and specify which contributions merit authorship, given the admittedly murky framework advanced here. A variety of possible arrangements are workable and reasonable. In particular, Paneth,³ as a concerned member of the Editorial Board, devised a taxonomy to which we shall refer potential authors for guidance. We think it will prove useful in specifying authorship, contribution, and acknowledgments with greater precision. The reference will be added each month in *What AJPH Authors Should Know*.

The current editors have wrestled with the issue of authorship, often in conjunction

with authors themselves, throughout our tenures on the Journal. We trust that the new editors of the Journal will be similarly held to this task. □

Mary Northridge
Deputy Editor

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